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Kol Nidre**

“How Could People Let This Be Done?”

As we discussed last week, the Shoah is more than just history.

In addition to being traumatic, for many of us it is personal.

And for anyone who pays attention, it is bottomless.

No matter how much we think we know about it,

there is always something new to discover

and it always carries lessons for today.

Maybe this is why, as we mentioned on Rosh Hashanah,

a recent survey of American Jews said “remembering the Holocaust”

is more essential to being Jewish than anything else.

But as we saw then and will see again tonight and tomorrow,

while the Shoah was unique in many ways,

what it tells us about humanity is not all that new.

Last week we asked, “How Could People Do This?”

and traveled on the expressway that leads

from resentment to hate to bloodshed.

Tonight we ask, “How Could People Let This Be Done?”

If there is anything good to say about the perpetrators,

the ones who “did this,” it is that their numbers were relatively few.

But the people who did nothing to stop them,

the bystanders who turned away and let it happen, were legion.

Without them the perpetrators could have never accomplished what they did.

In today’s language, they were enablers.

We will read in tomorrow afternoon’s Torah portion,

“You shall not hate your brother in your heart.” (Lev. 19:17)

That commandment is addressed to the would be perpetrators.

Because as we have seen, the road from hatred to bloodshed is short.

The verse immediately preceding it says,

“You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.” (Lev. 19:16)

That one is addressed to the would be bystanders.

The proportion of those who stand idly by is no smaller today

than it was 70 years ago.

And if you find that disturbing, here’s one more:

we may be among them.

Many of us remember when it was quite common to wonder what

Germans, Poles, Ukrainians, Latvians and others,

of a certain age and geographic proximity, did during the war.

Today we may wonder about their descendants.

Some of us may have even asked them,

**“What were your parents/grandparents doing back then?”
 Few will admit that their ancestor was a perpetrator,
 at least not to an outsider,
 but many will acknowledge that they were bystanders.
 And if you ask them how their parents/grandparents,
 presumably decent people, could have “stood idly by,”
 they may tell you what their parents or grandparents said to them,
 “We didn’t know.”**

Maybe it was true.

**Much of the “Final Solution” was carried out in secret.
 But it was such an enormous operation.
 It required, in addition to the actual murderers,
 tens of thousands of accomplices.
 And for every accomplice there were likely multiple bystanders,
 who must have known something,
 but stood idly by and did nothing.
 Railroad workers, contractors, material suppliers, factory owners, truck drivers,
 police officers, construction workers, property agents,
 accountants, scientists, actuaries, appraisers, attorneys,
 propagandists, clerks, typists, cooks, laborers, sentries, more...
 And the death camps themselves
 were not necessarily in the equivalent of Siberia.
 At Majdanek, which I’ve visited three times now,
 the “#10” city bus stops literally right outside the gate.
 The camp was scarcely further from the city of Lublin,
 than we are at this moment from the Tavernier Creek bridge.
 But nobody knew! Amazing.**

Okay, today is not Judgment Day for them.

It is Judgment Day for us.

We are not here to hold the last generation to account.

We are here to hold ourselves to account.

As we asked the last generation,

“What were you doing about the horrors of 1943?”

**We can expect that the next generation, our children and grandchildren,
 will ask us what we were doing about the horrors of 2016?**

I pray we have a decent answer

**when they ask what we were doing about the refugees
 who are currently flooding the world.**

65 million of them, more than ever before in recorded history.

What are we doing—

**about those driven from their homes,
 poisoned and bombed from the skies,
 left to founder on the high seas,
 consigned to smugglers and traffickers with little regard for their lives.**

The questions are more than a little reminiscent of the Holocaust,
and our history as a refugee people.
And because it's in every newspaper and on every screen every day
none of us will be able to say, "We didn't know."

We are not the perpetrators, thank God.

So we are either going to be bystanders or up-standers.

Which will it be?

And saying we moved to Florida so we wouldn't have to
answer these questions is not an acceptable response.

Especially for Jews.

We are the ones who have been putting the world's feet to the fire,
and rightly so, for the last seventy years over what happened to us.

We are the ones who have pointed the finger at practically every other nation
for doing nothing, for being bystanders, while we were running for our lives.

If you want to blame FDR for not bombing the rail lines to Auschwitz
by all means go ahead.

It's not as simple a question as some people make it out to be,
but if you want to go there, there's a case to be made.

But if you are going to do that,

you need to be demanding just as loud if not louder,
that we act to rescue the refugees today.

Anything else is hypocrisy.

Again, we can't say that we don't know.

And we won't say that we don't care.

Of course we do.

We are decent human beings. We care when innocent lives are lost,
especially children's lives.

More than a million Jewish children perished in the Shoah—
another statistic we never seem to tire of repeating.

We also care when countries slam their doors in the face of the desperate.

We've had enough of them slammed in our faces
to know what that feels like too.

And since we've been shouting "Never Again"

let's make sure we understand what that means.

It does not, and cannot, mean "Never Again to us."

If that's all it means, we can drop every bit of our moral pretense right now.

"Never again" needs to mean "Never Again" to any of God's children.

Unless it does, unless we motivate ourselves, as Jews,

to act on behalf of at least some others,
we can "remember the Holocaust" all we want—
but we will be missing much of the point.

We have been bystanders, many of us.

We've shaken our heads and told ourselves, "It's not our problem."

We may have even told ourselves that “those people,”
yes them, the victims, somehow deserve their fate.

“What do you expect, the way they live in that country?”

We’ve all heard it. Some of us have doubtless thought it.

The irony of course is that is exactly what people once said about us.

That we were not the “right kind of people,”

that we would somehow “corrupt society,” that we would be “disloyal.”

I don’t know how much I expect the rest of the world to learn from the Shoah.

But I do expect us to understand that this response is unworthy of us.

I’m sure back then that many were bystanders because they were afraid.

Even here it sometimes takes courage to express

an unpopular or antigovernment opinion— especially in wartime.

But this is a free country. Our government is not going to come after us

for raising a voice in protest, thank God.

So that’s no excuse either.

Okay then. We can’t say that we don’t know and

we can’t say that we don’t care and

we can’t say that we are afraid,

we can’t say it’s not a Jewish issue.

So how then do we account for the fact that so many of us, Jews and non-Jews,
are doing exactly what the Torah forbids,

standing idly by while our neighbors’ blood is shed?

I’m afraid this too turns out to be not so difficult to answer.

We do it by turning a blind eye instead of a caring one.

By being self-centered. By acquiescing.

By telling ourselves it’s not our problem.

“How could people let this be done?” They let it be! Done.

But I’m sure it goes deeper than that.

And we alluded to it a moment ago.

Maybe we tell ourselves it’s someone else’s problem

because we don’t much care “for those people.”

Because after all, they are so very different from us.

Once again, Jews know what it’s like to be on the wrong end of that stick.

A generation ago the Germans said we were not real Germans.

the Poles said we were not real Poles,

the French said we were not really French,

the Russians said we were not real Russians, etc., etc., etc.,

and they treated us accordingly.

Btw, at the same time many Americans said we were not real Americans.

And the anti-Semitism was so thick that some of

our parents and grandparents started to wonder about it themselves.

Today we know we’ve succeeded in America as well as any group ever has.

But we didn’t know that then. And neither did our neighbors.

So when we were in trouble overseas, many of our erstwhile fellow citizens found it all too easy to convince themselves to be bystanders.

It is amazing that in this of all countries, people will accuse immigrants and refugees of being “the Other.” Because unless your family was here before the Pilgrims, you were once an immigrant or refugee too. And chances are, those who were here before you didn’t want you or your kind coming over either. How many more of our people might have been saved had this greatest of all countries not taken that attitude and opened its borders to our grandparents and great-grandparents when they were trying to escape the onrushing armies? And how much greater would America be today had they been allowed to come in? All the brainpower, all the culture, all the business know how, all the undying loyalty to the land that rescued them from the jaws of death and gave them the opportunity to live free, safe and prosperous. They would have been the greatest patriots ever.

As we know that is not what happened. The fearful voices drowned out the hopeful ones. They said we would bring in alien ideas, alien beliefs, alien religion. They said we would never assimilate, that we’d take their jobs. That we would be Communists, that we’d be criminals. That we were not America’s problem, keep us out. You don’t need me to tell you that we hear many of those same voices today. As we have through much of America’s history. At one time or another it has been keep out the Italians, keep out the Irish, keep out the Greeks, keep out the Catholics, keep out the Chinese, lock up the Japanese, keep out the Cubans, keep out the Muslims, keep out the Mexicans, keep out the Other. How much less of a country this would be if we had listened.

Israel is far from perfect on immigration but any Israeli will tell you that immigration is the #1 reason the country is as successful as it is. Immigrants not only bring gratitude and patriotism, but talent, energy and creativity from the four corners of the earth. Not every community is as successful as every other and yes, some turn out to be bad people, but that’s no reason to let an entire population founder, or God forbid, perish.

Speaking of bad people, we might keep in mind that the terrorist who set fire to the mosque in Ft. Pierce, FL a few weeks ago, was a Jew.

Fortunately, most Americans realize that an infinitesimal number of us,
if that, are like him.
We could do worse than extend that same understanding to others.

We are also aware that some of them don't particularly like us.
But anyone who has worked in this arena
can tell you stories, many stories,
about how that prejudice can be broken.
It happens to be incredibly easy when they see us as their friends;
as the ones who help them find jobs, houses, schools and repairmen.
As the ones who become their trusted neighbors and co-workers;
when we pray together,
when we help dissolve the prejudice against them.
And please note that I speak here from personal experience.

It's amazing how far simple acts of decency can go
when you are fleeing a war torn country
and trying to make a new home in this one.
More than once we've heard them say,
"Honestly, where I grew up I was taught to hate Jews.
Now, here in America, I see that what I was taught was wrong."

We should all have enough faith in the power of America,
and the power of the American dream,
to follow that commandment the Torah repeats more than any other, 36 times,
and welcome the stranger.
This has been not only our identity but
the source of our greatest strength, since Plymouth Rock.
If we don't have enough faith in America
to take in the next generation of immigrants,
and believe that they will succeed, as most of us have,
we are not as exceptional as we like to think.

So, "How could people let this be done?"
People become bystanders when we are fearful, self-centered, prejudiced.
When we fail to welcome the stranger,
when we ignore our own history,
when we neglect the moral imperative.
That's a pretty good *Al Chet* right there.

We may also be bystanders because we feel powerless.
Because even if we want to make a difference, we don't know how.
It can seem overwhelming. But I have good news.
There is an organization called HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.
Perhaps you've heard of it.
It was founded in 1881 to help Jews fleeing pogroms in Russia.

If your family came to America between then and now,
 there's a good chance they were aided by them.
 Then, as now, there was opposition to immigration.
 But HIAS has always demanded that America, and Americans,
 live up to our best. Once again, that's how we all got here.
 Today HIAS helps open America's doors to the next generation of immigrants,
 who will make our country greater than it is today.
 And if you are skeptical about this, take note:
 The founders of Google, Tesla and WhatsApp,
 to name just a few, are immigrants.
 Every American Nobel Laureate in science announced this week
 is an immigrant.
 The father of the founder of Apple, Steve Jobs, was a Syrian refugee.
 42 of today's Forbes 400 richest Americans are immigrants.
 They've created an awful lot of jobs and wealth.
 I don't know about you but I'm glad they're here.

This is an unusual historical moment.
 For the first time in many centuries,
 there are no Jewish refugees to speak of, praise God.
 So HIAS has been bringing to America human beings fleeing from
 Afghanistan, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Ethiopia, Haiti, Hungary,
 Iran, Morocco, Poland, Romania, Tunisia, Vietnam & the former Soviet Union.
 They also help resettle in other countries those who cannot come to the US.
 HIAS' motto is one that is worth repeating,
 "We do not do this because they are Jewish,
 We do this because we are Jewish."

There is coalition of over forty major Jewish organizations,
 as disparate as the Union for Reform Judaism,
 The Orthodox Union, the ADL and the Jewish War Veterans,
 who have passed resolutions encouraging American Jews
 to follow the Torah's commandment and welcome the stranger, today.

Our own Linda Kaplan, who heads the KJCC's *Tikkun Olam* Committee,
 and is also an immigration attorney,
 has been working to raise awareness on this issue.
 She and others will be at a table in the foyer
 after the service tonight and during the breaks tomorrow,
 with information and suggestions on ways that we can be up-standers.
 How Could People Let This Happen?
 So that when the next generation asks us, we'll be able to tell them,
 "We were the ones who tried to stop it."

We'll close with words from Elie Wiesel, z"l.
 "We must always take sides.

**Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim.
Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”**

He also said,

**“There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice,
but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.”**

We are gathering tonight and tomorrow fasting and in prayer.

**We are doing this in order to make ourselves
better human beings and better Jews.**

**May our actions this day and beyond seal ourselves
for just those blessings in the heavenly book.**

G'mar tov and shana tovah.

With special thanks to my friend and teacher, Avi Marcovitz.